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ABSTRACT

In response to research indicating that elementary school children have little or no understanding of the reading process, this paper presents the following statements designed to help students develop a good concept of reading: reading is when meaning is reconstructed from written symbols, reading is a way of satisfying our needs, reading is using experiences and knowledge to gain meaning from written symbols for some purpose, and reading is reacting. The statements are accompanied by several activities designed to help students understand and become familiar with them. In a culminating activity, it is suggested that students keep logs in which they detail the kinds of materials they have read, their purpose in reading each item, and their reactions to the material. The paper points out that these activities should enable students to see that reading is a complex process in which the reader does not just say the words but actively participates in the reading process to reconstruct meaning and to satisfy his or her needs. (RL)

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Make Reading Sensible: Help Students Discover Its Essence

Teaching reading might be simplified if there was some way to look inside students' heads to find out their ideas about reading. When Edwards (1958) interviewed 66 poor readers, he found that many of them were unaware of the importance of meaning in reading. To help remedy this situation, Edwards (1962) suggested that teachers help students see that reading is a meaningful activity.

A research study (Johns and Ellis, 1976) involving 1,655 students from grades one through eight revealed that many students have little or no understanding of the reading process. The students' responses emphasized decoding or "sounding out" strategies and excluded the role meaning plays in reading.

In an effort to help a class of middle grade students develop a good concept of reading, I have listed several statements on reading and some activities to help students understand and become familiar with them. After completing these steps students should have a better concept of reading. They can demonstrate this knowledge by being able to repeat these statements about reading in their own words and integrate them in reading tasks. When they understand these concepts, they could try to help a younger child who does not have a good concept of reading develop one.

STATEMENT I: Reading is when meaning is reconstructed from written symbols.

Suggested Activities:

1. Present the students with the following: Hun sog voy ado sinco. Ask them if they can read it and, if they think they can, ask them what it means. Emphasize that in order for reading to take place there must be an exchange of meaning. Even if they pronounce the words, this is not meaningful because these "words" do not make any sense.

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2. Show the students these words: home everyone went and party the over o'clock was ten at. Ask if they have read this. If they say yes go back to the definition above and ask them what the meaning was that they got from "reading" those words. Discuss why even though these are familiar English words there wasn't any meaning and point out that this was not reading. Words need to be put into a meaningful sequence to make sense. Encourage the students to arrange the words into a meaningful sentence that can be read.

3. Present the students with the following: Yo voy al cine. Ask the children if they can read that sentence. Tell them that this is Spanish and tell them how to pronounce the words. Again ask them if they can read the sentence now. By now they should realize that they are not reading it unless they know what the words mean in English. After they know how to interpret the Spanish words, they can now read the sentence because in their minds they will understand the meaning. (It means I am going to the movie.) If some students can read Spanish use the French equivalent: Je vais au cinéma.

4. Discuss how reading is related to speaking. When we speak our purpose is to say something that will have meaning for a listener. If our listener didn't get any meaning from our speech, it would not make much sense to keep on talking to him/her. Therefore, it does not make much sense to keep looking at a bunch of words if they have no meaning. You either have to find some way of finding out what they mean or quit trying to read them. Have the students pretend they all

have lost their voice and have to communicate with each other for a while by writing down what they want to say and having their would-be listeners read what they have to say. Discuss how books that they read are similar to their notes because the authors of the books have something meaningful they want to say that they want students to know and, by reading, the students can make sense out of the book.

Through these activities the students should realize that reading is making meaning from print; reading is not just pronouncing or saying the words.

STATEMENT II: Reading is a way of satisfying our needs; it has a purpose.

Suggested Activities:

1. Ask students what they have read before coming to school. Ask them if they had a purpose for reading. If they can't think of any real purpose that they had, try to convince them that there was one. Perhaps it was simply to satisfy curiosity or for entertainment. Show them that there are many purposes for reading besides reading in school because they have to.

2. Have students make a list of all the kinds of reading materials they can think of and the purpose for reading each one.

Examples: comic books for entertainment
labels on cans to know what you're buying
encyclopedias to find out information

3. Have students list specific objectives or information that can be acquired through reading. Have others try to think of reading material that supplies information and where that material can be found.

Example: What is the largest state in the union? Look in a geography book, an almanac, or an encyclopedia.

4. Have students think of different things that they sometimes write for others to read and the purpose they had for writing them and the purpose the reader had for reading them.

Example: an invitation to a party

These activities should lead students to the realization that reading is a way people have of satisfying their needs. There are many different purposes for reading: to learn how to do something, to learn how to find something, for entertainment, etc. In the above activities, the teacher should supplement students' ideas with additional purposes.

STATEMENT III: Reading is when you use your experiences and knowledge to gain meaning from written symbols for some purpose. Because not everyone has had the same experiences and because people have different purposes for reading, different people can get different meaning from the same written symbols.

Suggested Activities:

Have students list things that they like to read but that another person of their age would probably not be interested in.

List things that they like to read but that someone several years younger would not want to read.

List things that they read but that their parents would not be interested in and vice-versa.

With the above lists, discuss why people would have different feelings about the same reading and what these feelings might be.

STATEMENT IV: Reading is reacting.

Suggested Activities:

1. List some different types of reading material and have students say what they think their reactions would probably be. Discuss the different kinds of reactions that people often have from reading and suggest ones that students don't mention, for example, sympathy for a character, dislike for a character, suspense, excitement, fear, boredom, wishing things had happened differently, confusion, etc.

2. Read the whole class the same story and have them write down all their reactions to it. Have them compare their reactions to see how they are different. Suggest things that the students might not think of such as, "What would you have done if you were the main character? How would you have felt?"

Culminating Activity

Have students keep a log of their reading activities for one week where they record the different kinds of reading material that they read and some specific examples of each different type. They should list the purpose they had for reading the particular item or what need was satisfied by reading it and their reaction to the material read.

Through these activities students should see that reading is a complex process in which the reader does more than just say the words. The reader must actively participate in the reading process to reconstruct meaning and to satisfy his/her needs.

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